

The National Report Card on Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors

The Sixth Annual Survey of Adult Americans

**National Environmental Education and Training
Foundation**

November, 1997

Roper Starch Worldwide

Turning Data into Intelligence Worldwide

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N.E.E.T.F.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Having basic environmental knowledge is important to America. We are all connected to the environment through the places we live, the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe. An understanding of what pressures come to bear on the nation's environment and how to alleviate those pressures is one key to a sound future.

This NEETF/Roper survey which, for the sixth straight year, looks at the opinions of Americans concerning the environment has a new dimension. This year we added an assessment of what adult Americans actually *know* about the environment. For the first time, we also looked at people's environmental behaviors to see what relationships there are among attitudes, knowledge and activities.

The news is mixed, but mostly troubling, with less than one third of Americans having a fairly simple knowledge of the causes or content of key environmental concerns. This gap in understanding will make it hard for policy makers to address some of our toughest issues. It will also make it difficult for members of the public to know what they can do to protect the environment.

We hope that the 1997 Report Card will help policy makers and other leaders to see the needs we have for improving basic environmental knowledge so that in the early part of the next century we will all receive a passing grade.

We wish to acknowledge the principal analyst of the data for this project, Dr. Lynn Musser, and also to thank her for her work on redesigning the survey instrument. Her assistant, Kim Hase, was extremely helpful in question development. David **Lintern** of Roper Starch Worldwide continues to be an outstanding partner in this ongoing research effort and we are grateful to Roper for their expertise.

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Summary and Overview

Two out of Three Americans Get a Failing Grade on the National Environmental Report Card

- Two out of three survey respondents (68%) failed to correctly answer nine or more of 12 simple questions on the environment.
- Only one in ten makes the “Environmental Dean’s List” with 11 or more correct answers.
- There is an alarming lack of knowledge on some of our most critical environmental problems:
 - Only 23% of Americans are able to identify run-off as the leading cause of water pollution.
 - Only 33% of Americans know that burning fossil fuels is America’s primary method for generating electricity, or what impact this has on air quality.

Misinformation may be as much of a problem as lack of knowledge

- People are two times more likely to believe (incorrectly) that factories are the main source of water pollution than they are to know the correct answer.
- Nearly half of all Americans think (incorrectly) that dams produce most of our electricity.

Policy-Makers Are Thwarted

- Lack of public environmental knowledge impedes policy-makers’ ability to address some of our most complex environmental problems.
- Solutions to some issues (such as run-off water pollution) lie, in part, in individual citizen action. Such solutions will be difficult to achieve if three out of four Americans think other sources are the cause of the problems.
- It will be difficult to address issues such as acid rain and global warming if most people think power production comes from air-safe hydropower.

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